

At Pacific Lutheran University (PLU), the concept of vocation is not simply a question of “What do you want to do with your life?” Rather, it becomes a broader, deeper invitation to explore what the world needs, and how each of us might respond especially when it comes to the urgent and complex task of promoting human and ecological flourishing. As a first-year international student from Pakistan majoring in Computer Science and Data Science, I have found this framing both challenging and transformative.

Coming from Pakistan, a country rich in biodiversity but facing immense environmental degradation, I carry a personal stake in conversations around sustainability. In Pakistan, environmental concerns are entangled with issues of poverty, political instability, rapid urbanization, and weak governance. From the devastating floods of 2022 to the persistent water crises in rural and urban areas, ecological decline is not a distant issue it is an everyday reality. Yet, these conversations are often overshadowed or politicized, leaving vulnerable communities without adequate support or platforms for advocacy.

Arriving at PLU, I initially viewed sustainability through a purely technical lens. I wanted to develop data-driven solutions that could help mitigate environmental issues like pollution, climate change, and resource depletion. But through a series of academic and co-curricular experiences including my Environment and Culture class, a J-term book group centered on Robin Wall Kimmerer’s *The Serviceberry*, and hands-on involvement with campus initiatives I came to understand that sustainability is far more than a set of problems waiting for technical solutions. It is a lived, relational practice grounded in thoughtful inquiry, service, leadership, and care.

This essay explores how these four values, shaped by my journey as an international student and enriched through my PLU education, are not only academic ideals but essential practices for a sustainable and just world.

Thoughtful Inquiry: Challenging Dominant Narratives and Listening Across Borders

The journey toward ecological consciousness begins with thoughtful inquiry with the willingness to ask difficult questions, to sit with uncertainty, and to challenge assumptions. At PLU, this value has been central to my academic experience, especially in the Environment and Culture course where we engaged deeply with the intersection of environmental thought, cultural practices, and justice. In that class, I was introduced to Indigenous worldviews that contrast starkly with the extractive logic of Western capitalism.

Robin Wall Kimmerer's *The Serviceberry* presented the concept of the "honorable harvest," a framework rooted in gratitude, reciprocity, and restraint. This perspective challenged me to reconsider how I conceptualize sustainability not as an issue to be "solved" through innovation or efficiency alone, but as a relationship to be nurtured with humility and respect. These ideas resonated with me in ways I didn't anticipate. Growing up in Pakistan, I witnessed environmental degradation firsthand, trash-clogged rivers, smog-laden skies, and farmland reduced to dust. But I also saw my grandmother save water with reverence and my neighbors reuse materials out of both necessity and care. Although we lacked formal environmental education or green infrastructure, there existed an unspoken ethic of resourcefulness, rooted in lived experience and ancestral knowledge. At PLU, I began to see these practices not as

backward or outdated, but as powerful expressions of sustainable living.

Thoughtful inquiry also involves interrogating privilege and power. As someone navigating the American educational system, I've come to understand how dominant narratives often exclude or flatten the experiences of the Global South. In discussions about climate change or sustainability, I rarely hear about the millions of people displaced by monsoons in South Asia, or the children in Karachi who develop respiratory illnesses from unregulated industrial pollution. This silence is not accidental; it reflects a deeper imbalance in whose voices are heard and whose suffering is recognized.

PLU's commitment to inquiry has helped me confront these erasures. Through class discussions, research projects, and conversations with peers and professors, I've developed the tools to question not only environmental practices, but also the frameworks we use to define knowledge, value, and progress. This critical lens is essential if we are to build sustainability initiatives that are inclusive, just, and globally relevant.

Service: Translating Knowledge into Community Impact

At PLU, service is not a one-time volunteer act it is a sustained commitment to putting learning into action in ways that uplift communities. As a student navigating life in a new country, I've come to see service not only as a way to contribute, but also as a way to belong.

My engagement with the PLU Food Pantry has been particularly meaningful. As someone who has relied on the pantry during times of financial strain, I've experienced firsthand how access to

resources can make a critical difference. But the Food Pantry is more than just a support system it is a model of sustainable, community-based care. It minimizes waste, redistributes surplus, and challenges the stigma associated with food insecurity.

In my hometown in Pakistan, this ethic of shared resources is deeply embedded in our culture. During Ramadan, for example, it is common to see community iftars organized in streets and mosques spaces where the wealthy and poor break bread together. Food, in these moments, becomes a vehicle for justice and solidarity. Seeing similar principles reflected in PLU's sustainability efforts reminded me that care and sustainability can transcend borders.

Leadership: From the Margins to the Center

Growing up in Pakistan, I rarely saw young people especially girls engaged in environmental advocacy. Leadership in these spaces was often limited to elite circles or heavily politicized. As a result, I never imagined myself as a sustainability leader. But PLU has taught me that leadership doesn't have to mean having a title or a microphone. It can mean cultivating spaces of inclusion, empathy, and shared purpose.

One of the most powerful experiences I've had at PLU has been through DJS Lounge Check-Ins, where students gather to discuss various environmental and humanitarian issues.

Care: The Heartbeat of Sustainability

Of all the values that PLU emphasizes, care has been the most transformative for me. It is care

that connects inquiry to action, service to leadership, and personal experience to collective responsibility. In *The Serviceberry*, Kimmerer writes, “What we take, we must give back.” This principle is as much about love as it is about justice.

Working in the Community Garden, I experienced care in a tangible way. At PLU, I’ve found echoes of the ethic of care in the garden, where students cultivate food not just for sustenance, but for community building and environmental education.

Care has also guided my approach to academic work. As a future technologist, I know the importance of this principle. Algorithms and models are not neutral. They reflect the values of those who create them. If I am to use my skills in the service of sustainability, I must anchor my work in care for people, for ecosystems, and for future generations.

Conclusion: A Vocation Shaped by Place and Purpose

My PLU journey has shown me that sustainability is not a side interest or extracurricular project it is a vocation. And like all vocations, it is shaped by who we are, where we come from, and what we choose to do with the gifts and challenges we’ve been given.

As an international student from Pakistan, I carry with me the urgency of climate injustice, the memory of shared meals in tight-knit communities, and the vision of a future where sustainability is not a privilege but a right. At PLU, I’ve found a space where these experiences are not just acknowledged, they are integral to how I learn, serve, lead, and care.

Moving forward, I hope to use my background in computer science and data science to create tools that advance environmental justice tools that are ethical, accessible, and grounded in community needs. But more than that, I hope to continue growing into the kind of person who leads with empathy, listens with humility, and acts with integrity.

As the Wild Hope Center reminds us, we are not called to this work alone. We are “called with others.” It is together across cultures, disciplines, and experiences that we will cultivate a sustainable future. One rooted in inquiry, growing through service, shaped by collaborative leadership, and nourished by deep, abiding care.